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New dance craze: 600-year-old bhangra

Heather West

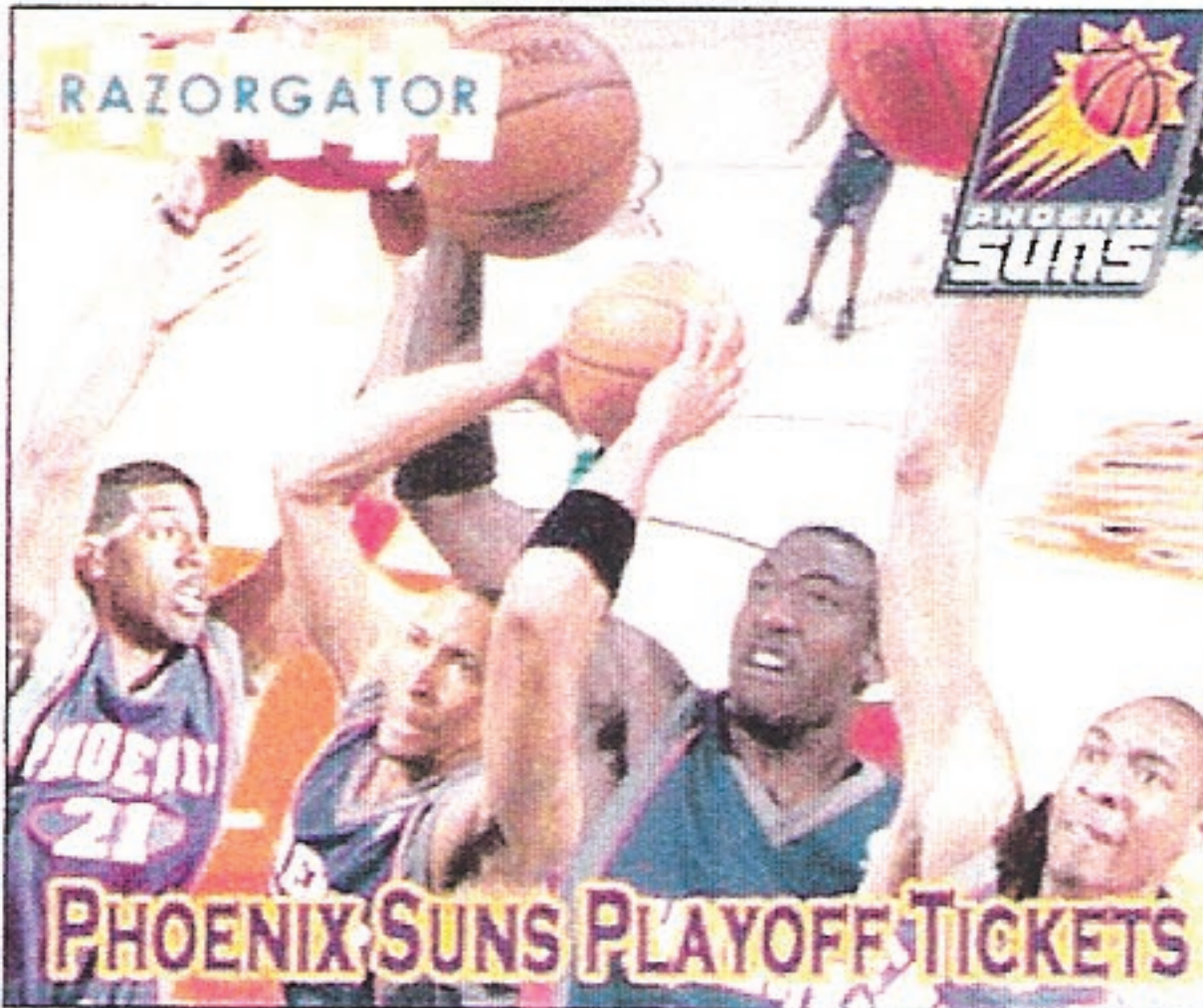
Columbia News Service
Apr. 28, 2005 12:00 AM

NEW YORK - An executive in a charcoal suit bounces to the clangy ring of a two-sided Indian dohl drum. In a sea of clubgoers, where flailing limbs smack into neighboring dancers, he waves a red kerchief high, shrugs his shoulders and grins widely.

"Everybody go stomp. Back. Stomp. Back!" instructor Brenden Varma shouts from the stage, his commands quickening with the speeding drum.

It is the eighth anniversary of Basement Bhangra, a monthly celebration at the Manhattan nightclub Sounds of Brazil, known as SOB's. Started by the DJ Rhekha Malhotra, who is known for mixing hip-hop tracks with South Asian beats, the event has popularized the lively Punjabi folk music and dance known as bhangra in New York and beyond.

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Bhangra is infiltrating American pop culture and attracting an increasingly diverse set of devotees. Artists such as Jay-Z, Missy Elliott and Mariah Carey in her latest album have incorporated its beats into their work.

The music originated in the Punjab region of northern India and eastern Pakistan at least 600 years ago and was performed by

entire communities during the harvest season.

"The moves aren't complicated," said participant Katherine Withers, 31. "You just need a lot of energy."

The bhangra's popularity has moved beyond the nightclub scene to classes, competitions, even workout videos. Increasingly, non-Indians are drawn into the mix, making Indian traditions more and more familiar to Americans, say bhangra followers.

Dancing the bhangra involves jumping, swinging the arms in short, rapid, circular motions and thrusting them into the air, all the while bouncing at the knees and shrugging the shoulders - as if doing lightweight shoulder presses.

Though New York is considered the "most bhangra-friendly city," attracting droves of non-Indians, nightclub parties have caught on in other parts of the country.

In Seattle, the Baltic Room and the Mirabeau Room feature bhangra nights, often playing Bollywood pop in addition to Punjabi folk jams. "This has been going on for well over a year now and doesn't seem like it's going to stop," said Kamal Sandu, president of the Indian Student Association at the University of Washington.

Some purists see the competitions as a distraction from the traditional Punjabi dance. "I think it's going in a direction that is not as connected to the music," said Rhekha. In an effort to outdo each other each year, the teams add acrobatic feats seen in cheerleading competitions.

Even workout videos are picking up on the trend. Sarina Jain, who calls herself the Indian Jane Fonda, started the Masala Bhangra Workout in athletic clubs in New York. Her sister Sheila leads the same routine in the San Francisco area, and Jain's Masala Bhangra videos and DVDs are sold online.

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